"It`s not my fault!" – Exploring multiple causal factors for educational and societal dropout in Asia and Europe

Marginalisation and Co-created Education - **Professor Kaz Stuart, University of Cumbria.**

Abstract
The Marginalisation and Co-created Education (MaCE) project was developed between the University of Southern Norway, VIA University in Denmark and the University of Cumbria in the UK and funded by Erasmus+. The project aims to co-create proposals to achieve an equitable and socially just education system through participative action research with people who are often categorised as 'Early School Leavers' (Clandinin, Steeves and Caine, 2013, pp.15-42). Academics co-researched with Batchelor of Arts students and Masters students, each conducting action research with between one and five young people each in a range of settings using an 'Indirect Approach' (Bunting and Moshuus, 2017; Moshuus & Eide, 2016).
This paper explores the conceptual framework called the 'Equalities Literacy Framework' (Stuart et al., 2019) developed from the first action research cycle of the project in order to tackle inequality in education (Gianakaki, McMillan and Karamichas, 2018). The framework is informed by the practice experience and theoretical knowledge of the international and interdisciplinary research team and data from 100 youth narratives. This paper provides a critical contextual overview of Early School Leaving, introduces the Indirect Approach, and presents the findings from the first year of research across three countries.

Keywords
Equality, equity, education, action research, early school leaver.

Introduction

The Research Project

The Marginalisation and Co-created Education (MaCE) project was developed between the University of Southeast Norway, VIA University in Denmark and the University of Cumbria in the UK and funded by Erasmus+. The project aims to understand school students' experience of marginalisation in education in order for the European team of academic and student researchers to co-create solutions for education and other sectors that support young people. In year one, a team of ten academics developed a research project and a conceptual framework for conceptualising equity in education. In year two the ten academics were joined by 30 students and this international team co-researched the narratives of 100 young people. This paper reports on the findings from this second year of research before the final year sees another 30 students and 100 youth inform educational practice.

Critical Contextual Overview

Young people who drop out of school are given a range of names. Many researchers and educationalists refer to them as 'Drop Out's'. In the UK they are called 'NEET', labelling them by their status of Not in Education, Employment or Training. These

are the polite, mainstream, yet deficit labels attached to young people who do not complete their education. As Fine (2017) states, this terminology is "flawed and intolerable" in three respects. Firstly, it defines a young person by something that they have not done (i.e. not been in school), secondly, it defines young people by deficits alone such as failing school (Stuart, 2018), and finally it places the entire blame of the phenomenon at the young person's feet (Orr, 2014). A more neural term is 'Early School Leaver' (ESL) yet this too, somehow, contains the assumption that it is the young person who did the leaving and therefore, the action is of their choosing. Many critical researchers are now proposing alternative titles for this phenomenon which indicate the culpability of the education system such as 'pushed out' and 'facilitated out' (Clandinin, Steeves, Caine, 2013 pp.15-42). The researchers in this project were keen to avoid recruiting 'drop outs' as this may serve to reinforce their labelling, stigma and internalisation of failure. Instead, the project recruited any young person who wished to speak to us as they would all have insight into what does and does not work in education no matter how successful or otherwise they may have been. This approach stands assumptions of sampling on its head.

Early School Leavers in Norway, Denmark and the UK.

Comparing ESL across the three countries was problematic for a range of reasons. Firstly, the three education systems vary a great deal, secondly the measures for ESL vary, and thirdly, ESL's are not a homogenous group whose experiences can necessarily be clustered under one umbrella term. Some key differences in the three education systems is presented in table one below to start to build a comparative contextual picture.

	Norway	Denmark	UK
First school	6 – 13 years of age Compulsory ESL not measured	6 – 16 years of age Compulsory ESL not measured	5 – 16 years of age Compulsory ESL not measured
Lower secondary school	13 – 16 years of age Compulsory ESL not measured		
Upper secondary	16-21 years of age Entitlement if achieve in secondary school	16 – 21 years of age Compulsory 20.9% ESL	16 – 18 years of age Compulsory 11.2% NEET / 13% ESL

	27% ESL		
Higher education	21 upwards Optional, funded 40% ESL	21 upwards Optional, funded 16% ESL	18 – 22 years of age Optional, not funded 6.2% ESL
Sources	Markussen, Frøseth, & Sandberg (2011) Statistisk sentralbyrå (2016)	The Danish Ministry of Education (2017) Arbejderbevægelsens Erhvervsråd (2017) Styrelsen for Forskning og Uddannelse (2018)	The House of Commons (2018) The European Union (2016) Universities UK (2018)

The table might suggest that there are fewer issues of early school leaving in the UK than in Norway and Denmark, it is unlikely that this is the case however. The UK has no clear measure for ESL. The Office for National Statistics collects data on young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training but this is only applied to 16 to 24 year olds. There is no measure of young people below 16 not attending school. Nor are national statistics collected for young people who truant from school or who are home educated. As ESL is not measured it may seem as if it does not exist, but this is far from the truth.

Despite the variations, it is clear that young people are missing school in all three countries. Given the causality between attendance and attainment (OECD, 2014) and the individual lifetime cost of ESL consequences ranging from 100,000 EUR to 1.1 million EUR (European Union Working Group, 2016), leaving school early is known to have significant impact on the future prospects of these young people. Each of these countries has policies intended to improve attendance and attainment such as ability streaming, standardised testing, and targeted support. Critical researchers have shown these approaches to be deeply flawed and problematic (Giannakaki, McMillan and Karamichas, 2018). Educational injustice prevails relatively unchallenged in a growing neoliberal meritocracy (Reay, 2017; Giroux, 2011; Wiederkehr *et al*., 2015). Each phase of this research project will attempt to critically disrupt the hegemonic status quo in the three participating countries from the narratives of young people themselves, the experts on their own lives.

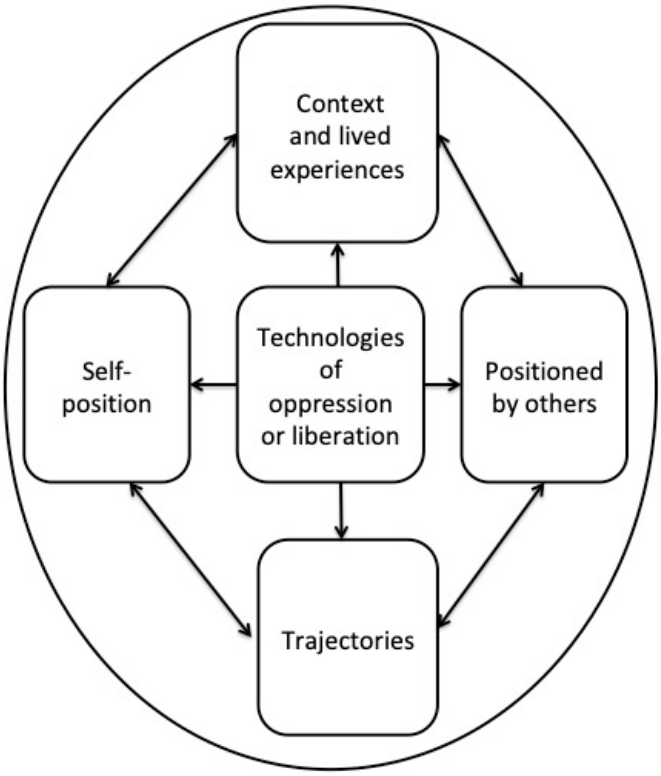
The Equalities Literacy Framework

The term equalities literacy refers to the ability to 'read' or have an awareness of equality, equity and associated social justice issues, to choose how to intervene, and to act to address these issues (Maynard and Stuart, 2018). The framework aims to render the processes that create and reproduce inequalities visible (Bourdieu, 2003; Fine and Weis, 2003). The Equalities Literacy framework is rooted in the sociological

construct of structure and agency (Archer, 1995). This field acknowledges that people are born into a world full of pre-existing structures which influence life opportunities and reproduce those very same structures (Bourdieu, 2003). If the inequality is not seen, acknowledged or addressed then society becomes complicit in its perpetuation. This research situates itself in this problematic socio-cultural space. With its structure and agency lens the framework takes account of inequitable educational contexts and individual responses. This avoids blaming solely the young person or the school for an occurrence of ESL and encourages each stakeholder to consider the range of actions available to them.

Inequity has two facets. One facet is comprised of disadvantage, oppression, marginalisation, isolation and deprivation. But this facet only exists in relation to the other facet comprising privilege, advantage, liberation, and social capital. It is therefore necessary to simultaneously discuss both disadvantage and privilege and all the positions in between (Hays, Dean and Chang, 2007; Fine and Weis, 2003). Any unequal system needs both winners and losers and privilege and deprivation exist only as relative to one another and therefore the whole socio-cultural landscape must be considered. The Equalities Literacy framework does just this, proposing that equality is a complex interaction of elements; cultural, social, inter and intra personal, with an imperative to render them visible.

The five elements of the Equalities Literacy Framework are interrelated and dynamic. We have used these elements to map our own educational experiences, those of the youth we interviewed, and as a practice tool to surface inequality in classes of school pupils and lecture rooms of students. It is therefore a tool for reflection and for dialogue, both of which lead to the potential for change. The framework is described in brief and further information can be found in the associated paper (Stuart et al., 2019).



1. Context and lived experience

People are born into situations that are not of their choosing – for some this is rags whilst for others it is riches (Dorling, 2010). Once born into these situations our lives are not entirely pre-determined, we still have a choice as to how to respond to the situation we find ourselves in (Archer, 1995). Many of the situations that people are born into are socially and culturally produced and reproduced (Thompson, 1997; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The very discourses of 'drop outs' and 'NEETs' are evidence of these socially created constructs. Privileged young people may have a context that prepares them well for education with a range of knowledge and experiences that enable them to thrive in schools, that is to say they have the social capital and a 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 2003) that supports educational success. Yet not all privileged young people to well, and not all disadvantaged young people do badly, lived experiences may vary despite the context one is born into.

2. Positioning by Others

Our context and lived experience influences the way other people treat us. Human beings tend to categorise and compare one another and in so doing create hierarchies of relative positions. The relative positions are created by the state, media and society (Jones, 2015; Bourdieu, 2003) and produce, reproduce and protect a status quo (Dorling, 2010; Fox, Piven and Cloward, 2015). The resulting discourses are hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971; Ledwith, 2016) in that they protect the interests of the 'haves' against the 'have not's', or distance a subgroup from the norm (Tyler, 2013; Dorling, 2010, Blackman and Rogers, 2017; Piven and Cloward, 1993).

3. Technologies of Oppression or Liberation

This positioning occurs through a range of tools. Some tools can be used for positive or negative intent, e.g. positive or negative labelling. Others however, such as shaming, are oppressive when used, and liberatory when absent. Labelling and stereotyping are commonly known and experienced tools (Dorling, 2010). 'Othering' is an extension of this process which psychologically protects us from the possibility of becoming like the other, or of the other having any similarities to ourselves (Foucault, 1978; Said, 1994). 'Social abjection' (Tyler, 2013) may follow on from this with the 'other' made vile and disgusting and not worthy of empathy (Tyler, 2013; Dorling, 2010; Blackman and Rogers, 2017). Other technologies include objectification (Bourdieu, 2003), shaming (Nussbaum, 2004) and willful blindness (Heffernan, 2011).

4. Positioning of Self

Individuals and groups might respond to the positioning in a range of ways; acceptance, victimhood, rebellion and deviance are all possible. This is an inter-personal process as it is in response to the positions bestowed, it is also intra-personal as individuals reconcile the messaging with their sense of self. Theory suggests the self-position adopted may have a major impact on the identity, agency and social mobility then experienced (Cote and Levine, 2002; Lawler, 2008).

5. Impact and trajectory

The 'final' impact trajectory is only fixed moment by moment as each element of the in/equality experienced is dynamic. Situations change and people themselves re-author their lives moment by moment (Clandinin, Steeves, Caine, 2013). The range of contexts, positions and self-positions accounts for the changeable and dynamic trajectories of any individual or group.

Whilst the impact of privilege and deprivation are not fixed, theory shows income deprivation correlates to a higher prevalence of negative outcomes (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). Indeed, the specific negative consequence of the lack of education experienced by ESL's is well documented (European Union Education and Culture DG, 2013). Whilst these negative outcomes are not fixed, they are increasingly likely for young people who are ESL and may be reproduced in on-going generations and attitudes, expectations and behaviours are reproduced.

This framework enabled the co-researchers to understand their own educational privileges and disadvantages, to holistically consider those of the young people they conversed with, and conceptualise the systemic nature of changes needed to interrupt such inequity.

Methods

The MaCE action research project works as: “a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory world view” (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p.1). The participation is between academics, students and young people who co-inquire educational experience and co-create solutions. This approach sought to redress the endemic marginalisation of young people from policy spaces (Ledwith, 2016; Hart, 1997) and to model an inclusive and equitable mode of working with youth.

Within the action research method a specific conversational tool was used which had been developed by the Norwegian academics prior to the project commencing. The Danish and UK academics learned this technique in year one and trained the students to use it at the start of year two. All the co-researchers then used this approach with the 100 young people encountered.

The Indirect Approach (Moshuus and Eide, 2016) seeks to remove the hierarchical power of ‘researcher’ and ‘informant’ and to elicit information in an indirect way in order to reduce the bias created by research agendas. The approach demands that the interview is replaced by a conversation, the semi-structured interview schedule torn up, and the researcher adopts a facilitative role, out on a conversational stroll with a young person, seeing where they want to go and what they see on the way. This contrasts to the role of the researcher as ‘miner’ digging in a determined way for deep seams of information that match their agenda. It therefore has similarities to an unstructured interview (Tanggaard & Brinkman, 2015). It is therefore an explorative qualitative approache, discovering something that we did not already know (Moshuus and Eide, 2016) and resonant with Participatory Action Research (Reason and Bradbury, 2001).

In practice, this means recruiting young people who want to volunteer to tell us something about their lives. Conversations occur in a relaxed manner with cups of tea and snacks, and with the young people leading the discussion. This was relatively straightforward with confident, vocal young people and much more challenging with youth of the opposite disposition. The young people were recruited from a range of settings – schools, youth clubs, shelters, charities, social work settings. We know they were of mixed gender and aged 13-22, but did not ask for any other demographic details. Some of the young people provided these in their narratives of themselves, and from this information we believe we reached a diverse demographic. All the participants provided ethical consent, and where relevant, parents or other significant adults consented on behalf of the young person.

The conversations lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were all audio recorded and transcribed. Each co-researcher then coded their data set and embarked on an abductive analysis (Tavory and Timmermans, 2013) to see where links existed to the equalities literacy framework (deductively) and what other information emerged (inductively).

Findings

The academics and students in this project worked as co-researchers analysing interview transcripts and developing findings. Taking all the narratives and re-coding them to present my analysis of the data would undermine this co-creative work and the ethos of the project. Consequently, the data presented as the findings from this research project are the findings from each of the pieces of co-research. The strength of this approach the co-creation of findings from a wide range of perspectives. The limitation is that a range of snapshots, or photographic images are presented that may not incorporate all the views or include each participant with the frame. To some extent, an indirect approach has therefore been taken with the analysis, allowing the analysis of each co-research team to tell their narrative.

Norway

There were ten students who co-researched in Norway, five BA students and five MA students, alongside three academic staff. Their year one findings are as follows.

- Boys who are emotionally affected by aesthetic activities in their personal life are more engaged in these kinds of subjects at school. This can, however, be negatively affected by 'bad' experiences as school such as bullying or poor relationships with teachers.

- The young people described teachers who said they do not fit in or pre-judged their school work either verbally or through body language. The young people also experienced pressure from teachers to perform tasks in specific ways outside their abilities and preconditions. The judgement and pressure from teachers was one factor that affected the performance of young people in schools and underlines the importance of teacher-student relationships.

- The young people experienced a lack of stability, security and belonging which challenged their ability to thrive in schools. The issues they reported included; emotional and physical distance to parents, drug abuse at home, a lack of language development, a lack of friends, feeling left out at school, changing school frequently, truancy and not belonging at school. These factors all affected the young people's ability at school and led to the feeling insecure in a school environment.

- Young people with mental health issues reported they did not feel adequately acknowledged or supported in schools. The young people felt teachers only viewed them as 'students' rather than as humans or children with holistic needs. As young people spend a large proportion of their lives in school it is important that the environment is a healthy for all aspects of their welfare, not just the academic performance.

- Young people with dyslexia felt unsupported by schools despite having diagnosed dyslexia. As a result of the poor support given in schools, the young people did not feel safe and felt overwhelmed by challenges. As a

result, their self-efficacy and motivation in school are low and their experiences of having dyslexia has negatively influenced their educational choices.

The co-research from Norway illustrates the complex nature of educational disadvantage. There are narratives that illustrate positive home experiences (with aesthetics) can aid engagement in education, but cannot overcome negative school experiences. Vulnerable young people with additional needs report isolation and difficulty in schools. These difficulties seem to be exacerbated in a culture of performativity in schools. Repeatedly the role of the teacher was reported as important, and young people were clear they wanted to a relationship with their teachers where they were seen as holistic individuals.

Denmark

There were three staff and four BA students who co-researched in Denmark. Their year one findings are as follows:

- Young people who participated reported a range of issues in their lives. These included; a lack of attention or neglect from their family, living in institutions or in foster care, experience of personal drug abuse or an environment of drug abuse, and additional needs such as dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The young people reported being positioned as stupid or lazy by the family and or school. Some young people felt supported by family and or school, whilst others felt unsupported, or felt they got the wrong sort of support from home and or school. As a result of this they felt they were educational failures, with that sense of failure sometimes starting in primary school. Some had been told they were failures by teachers. Many reported bullying in school, the feeling of not having friends or never having learned how to be a friend and how to make friends. As a result they were socially isolated within schools. For one young person success in sport, a valid occupation in ghetto areas, had enabled some success and recognition in school. For most, however, schools and family exerted significant pressure to succeed without accompanying support mechanisms. This had led to educational failure, being 'thrown out' of various schools and the commencement of a cycle of educational disruption and failure.

- The indirect approach used throughout the research project was analysed and found to have relevance for social work practice. In a social work context in Denmark, homeless people are interviewed in order to understand the reason for their homelessness. The indirect approach of interviewing was found to offer open, non-stigmatising opportunities for the individual to tell their own nuanced stories.

- The indirect approach offers unique insights into young people's lives and is powerful in privileging the young person's perspective and power. There are, however, areas of difficulty with the method. It is likely that young people will not have experienced this type of interview or conversation before and

therefore an explanation of the approach is important before work commences so that the researcher and participant have a shared understanding of how the work will progress. As the young person is free to share anything from their lives it is possible they will disclose sensitive information intentionally or unintentionally. The researcher cannot predict if this will happen or what the motivation for the disclosure is. This heightens the need for the researcher to be ethically attuned during interviews and to ensure the young person is supported appropriately after an interview should a disclosure have occurred.

The co-research from Denmark echoes and amplifies the findings from Norway. The Danish narratives paint a starker picture of interlocking factors leading to educational failure. Poor home experiences combined with poor educational support are a double disadvantage. Again, the performative nature of the educational system was seen as disadvantageous by young people. The methodological findings from Denmark highlight the potential for wider use of the indirect method.

UK

The UK co-research team included nine MA students who were all working in professional practice and three academics. Their findings are as follows:

- The young people who participated were varied and identified a range of privileges and disadvantages. They were all able to identify the ways in which education supported them and also prevented success. Individual needs included; poor family environments, drug abuse, foster care, involvement in crime, specific learning difficulties, gender issues, and homelessness. An overriding theme in the research was the sense that young people felt they were a 'number' or a 'unit' rather than a person, and the educational 'machinery' processed them. This depersonalised system of mass production did not support them to learn or to mature into adults. Experiencing the high performance and low-support environments had led to the students seeing themselves as failures, or as successful in 'playing the game'. Few were proud of educational achievements.

- Young people are highly aware of the expectations of their teachers. These expectations did not always match the expectations the young people had of themselves. The teachers perspectives came to dominate the young people and influenced their view of success and how they felt about themselves. Educational disadvantage was found to occur when the expectations placed on a young person did not match their capabilities and interests. This illustrates the need for teachers to have a detailed and individual understanding of each young person they teach. Education, therefore needs to be student-led or differentiated.

- Education was found to reproduce the social orders that exist more broadly in society. The young people adopted a range of self-positions regardless of their context. In this respect, whilst schools reproduce social inequalities,

they do not do so equally for all young people. Some young people adopted a positive self-position despite all, whilst others who had 'all' adopted negative self-positions. Therefore schools need to support a model of innate health and practices from positive psychology to enable all young people to mentally thrive.

- Young people described the importance of relationships to them. They equally stated the importance of peer relationships and teacher relationships. These relationships were viewed as fundamental to the sense of belonging, investment and achievement young people had at school. Teachers therefore need time to invest in relationships, and may need professional supervision to enable them to sustain difficult relationships.

- Young people described their teachers as viewing them as outputs not human beings. They experienced extreme bullying and oppression in schools and reported limited opportunities for reaching their potential or for social mobility. The solutions to the issues they faced were often short term 'sticking plasters' which did not tackle underlying issues. Young people also felt there was a set of complex unspoken rules, or a social order and culture in classrooms maintained by peers that may also be difficult to endure. Schools were therefore not safe spaces. The research concluded that adults need to treat young people as experts, as living libraries, and teachers need to engage in dialogue with them and remove the existing meritocracy.

- Young people reported a range of personal issues and experiences that related to the 'adverse childhood experience' or ACE model. They reported struggling in a school environment and feeling unsupported by teachers and peers. As such, the research proposed that schools are psychologically harmful places that are not working in an ACE or trauma informed way. The research proposed that this approach is needed along with mindfulness sessions to support the wellbeing of young people in schools.

The findings from the UK portray young people who also struggle in a high stakes performative educational context, and whose wide ranging needs are not acknowledged, understood, or met in schools. As a result they are unhappy, unsafe, and or experiencing educational failure. Whilst individual teachers were found to have potential to change these experiences for young people, they cannot do so within a system that constrains them to act, to teach, in particular ways, bound by particular rules. This is common across all countries.

The three countries offer a spectrum of welfare services – with Norway the most liberal, Denmark the middle, and the UK the least liberal. These policy positions with regard to welfare are reflected in a range of rankings of equality and happiness showing that equality benefits all (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010; Dorling, 2010). These policy positions do also seem to correspond with the narratives collated during this project. The narratives of educational disadvantage, alienation, and failure becoming more extreme from Norway to Denmark to the UK. What remains consistent

between them, however, is that education is a high stress and high performance environment where young people do not feel welcome or accepted as who they are, nor adequately supported to learn and develop into adults. This is a clear indication (if another was needed) that education systems globally need to change.

The 100+ accounts collected evidence young people have not learned to believe in themselves, achieve to their potential or complete school across all three countries. The reasons for these are both intersectional (Gross, Gottburgen and Pheonix, 2016:51), and a combination of systemic and individual issues (Archer, 1995). Even where welfare is at its strongest, it would seem that the educational system is not able to meet the young person as an individual, not meet their needs, nor ameliorate the impact of societal stratus and its reproduction within the school walls. The evidence also shows that unhappiness at school, underachievement and early school leaving are due to a nexus of inequality in accessing education, the process of learning and outcomes. This disadvantage can only be understood alongside the intertwined process of advantage and privilege. To view one without the other is to consider day without night. The Equality Literacy framework has equipped the project team and wider teachers and youth practitioners we have worked with to explicitly map, discuss and address these systems of inequality with young people and colleagues in classrooms and lecture halls.

The co-research conducted by Higher Education students and academics has successfully collected, analysed and reported findings for over 100 young people across three European countries. The experience has been valuable for all the participants (young people, students and academics) and has further yielded a range of important findings for the field of education. Aside from this, it has shown that co-creative learning is a success for all.

Conclusion

Firstly, the findings from this project suggest the co-created process of research adopted in this research has potential to transform Higher Education with students and academics co-discovering and reflecting on the voices and experiences of marginalised young people. We recommend this as a pedagogical approach in Higher Educational institutions to level, if not overcome, the inequalities present in those systems (Bathmaker et al., 2016).

Secondly, the methodological approach used in this research, the Indirect Approach has enabled young people to tell their stories as they wish with minimal researcher bias. The young people have found this process empowering and supportive and some of the research findings indicate the method has potential wider uses. Ethical issues may, however, be heightened when using such an open ended methodological approach and the researcher must tread with care.

Most importantly, the young people's narratives have led to powerful and important learning about educational disadvantage and those who experience it. Educational systems have been found to reproduce the intersectional inequalities at large in wider society, rather than ameliorating them. Despite the variations in welfare

across the three countries, young people still experienced varying degrees of privilege and disadvantage in schools, affecting their wellbeing, attainment and completion of schooling. The Equalities Literacy model has been helpful in accounting for the intersectional nature of inequality, the intertwining of structure and agency, and the key relationship between advantage and disadvantage.

As a result, we unsurprisingly recommend that schools adopt a 'critically pedagogical' approach (Giroux, 2011; Smyth, 2011). Critical pedagogy is a democratic educational approach which positions young people as valuable individuals, features high levels of dialogue and participation, and position young people as agents of their own meaningful learning. Out use of the Equality Literacy framework in classrooms and lecture halls suggest this approach can be effective on a meso level, as have Fine and Weiss (2003). Such collective action across schools would facilitate a more socially just and equitable school experience.

We are also painfully aware that collating stories of in/equality on our living room floors is not enough (Fine, 2017). As researchers we have a moral obligation to lift our work to the macro level to support social justice at a systemic level. This is the challenge we currently face, to become scholar activists who collectively work for educational change, we invite you to join us in your own ways.

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There are no conflicts of interest.

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